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New program to help ex-inmates find work

By: STACY BRANDT - Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO COUNTY ---- State and local organizations are designing a new countywide program intended to help former inmates get work and stay out of prison.

The California Prison Industry Authority chose San Diego County as the first area to bring its community re-entry project, which the authority's general manager said he hopes to spread across the state soon.

"We're really at the genesis of this," general manager Matt Powers said. He said he expects the first inmates to go through the program in about a month.

Various organizations are helping to put the program together, including the county Sheriff's Department, Mental Health Systems Inc. and the National Steel and Shipbuilding Company as well as various local employers, community groups and faith-based organizations.

The project will involve a team of coordinators that will establish a network of services to help ex-offenders adjust to life outside of prison starting up to nine months before their release.

"This is really an investment in public safety," Powers said, "because employed parolees mean safer communities."

Not only will the program give inmates a chance to obtain skills and learn work habits while incarcerated, Powers said, it will also focus on other services needed once they're released, including social and professional contacts.

The Sheriff's Inmate Services Division already provides similar services locally for county inmates. The partnership will allow the division to get statistical information for graduates of the vocational programs, said Ann Sasaki-Madigan, division manager.

By tracking graduates, Sasaki-Madigan said she hopes to be able to address needs that aren't being met.

National Steel and Shipbuilding Company started a pilot program with the authority about five years ago that spokesman Steve Clarey said has been very successful.

"We think it's good for the community," Clarey said of the program. "It's good for us, and it's certainly good for the individual."

Employment Manager Woody Breece said he has hired about a dozen people from the program and expects to hire more as it expands.

"The few that were taken have been good employees," he said. "Some have been superstars."

The prison authority is part of the state Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and operates commercial factories in state prisons. Only government entities can purchase the products, which range from furniture to law-enforcement equipment. The self-funded program provides training and jobs in 22 of the state's 32 prisons.

Powers said he pushes the agency to make a profit as he would any other business, but his ultimate goal is for the inmate employees to succeed when they're released.

"We're in business to hire employees; we don't hire employees to be in business," Powers said. "It's kind of backwards."

As part of the project, the authority is planning to hold a conference for local employers Oct. 20 in San Diego that will discuss the benefits of hiring ex-offenders. More information about the conference is available online at www.cce.csus.edu/cts/PIA/index.asp.

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